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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews some of the recent research relative to the thoughts and writings of the English art critic, Clive Bell, one of the leaders in British art criticism for the first part of the 20th century. Bell's conception of "art as significant form" is considered with specific reference to the following educators: (1) Roger Fry and Herbert Read; (2) Albert C. Barnes and John Dewey; and (3) Quentin Bell. In addition the doctrine of formalism is considered in light of current issues in art education such as discipline based art education (DBAE). Bell argued that aesthetic emotion arises from certain combinations of color and line, not from the subject matter of works of art. Significant form is what differentiates art form non-art. Herbert Read attempted to advance upon and improve the earlier formulations of both Fry and Bell by suggesting that it may not be significant form that separates art from non-art, but symbolic form. By so doing he moved aesthetic theory beyond the purely formal consideration. Bell may have conceptualized his idea of significant form as projections of the aesthetic object itself. The paper discusses Barnes's attempt to remove significant form from a property of the art object through his insistence on the significance of form as the basis for education in art. Barnes and Dewey evolved a method of art education that had a formal basis. The expression theory presents no consistent view concerning the implication of "art expresses feeling" theory. Susanne Langer, finally, presents an aesthetic theory that may reconcile the opposing assertions of formalism and expression theory. Borrowing elements of both, Langer achieves an aesthetics that is formalistic, expressionistic, and "semiotic" all at once. "Art," Langer says, "is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling. (DK)

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Clive Bell, the Doctrine of Significant Form, and Visual Arts Communication

(A Review of Sources)

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Abstract

This paper will review some of the recent research relative to the thoughts and writings of the English Art Critic, Clive Bell. His conception of "Art as Significant Form" will be considered with specific reference to the following art education:

a. Roger Fry and Herbert Rad
b. Albert C. Barnes and John Dewey
c. Quientin Bell

Finally the doctrine of formalism will be considered in light of current problems in art education such as DBAE, Descipline based Art Education.

Clive Bell, Significant Form and Bloomsbury

English art criticism in the early years of our century had its' greatest impact on the acceptance of the avante-garde and the early masters of the modern movement before 1920. One of the leaders in British Art Criticism for at least the first part of the 20th century was Clive Bell. There has been a late or remarkable interest in all of the Bloomsbury Group and certainly by anyone's criteria Clive Bell can qualify as a charter member.

A recent book by W. G. Bywater (Bywater, 1975) seems to be a good place to begin this review of research relative to the general topic. The author questions the appropriateness of Bell's 'Formalist' label, showing that his interest lay in the audience as well as in the work of the post-impressionists, his nurture of young English artists away from the Royal Academy, his membership of the Bloomsbury Group, and the subsequent attacks on Victorian morality whenever it crossed his path. Bell's 'significant form' is not a property which resides in the work alone, but was the total result of a complex interaction between artist, audience, and painting. An analysis of the articles in 'Art' magazine and of Bell's later work supports this argument and shows no disparity between his early and mature approaches. Eleven articles, written between 1919 and 1950, are included, and there is also a checklist of his published writings.

The key issue here is whether or not significant form sides alone in the art object. A beter term might have been to focus on "the significance of form" (which is what Bell and later Barnes and Dewey did). The doctrine of "significant form" as a property of the art object has probably led art educators to place to much emphasis on the elements and principles of design (Wilson, 1988).

Bywater's book makes the important observation that the British critics, Fry, Bell and Herbert Read were never really what might be called "strict formalists." They never adhered solely to considerations of only the art objects. Of course the very mention of Clive Bell's name immediately recalls Bloomsbury. How much his ideas were influenced by the two principal artists of the Group, Vanessa Bell (Clive's wife) and Duncan Grant (her sometimes lover) is really very hard to calculate.

Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant were at the center of the Bloomsbury Group, playing a leading part in the interplay of personal and intellectual life which characterized it. Another recent critic, Shone shows, in his book, the importance of Bloomsbury's painters and their central role in the development of British 20th century painting. Shone stresses that they led relatively quiet lives; they were rarely embroiled in art politics as were Roger Fry and Clive Bell; nor did they have the tremendous social life of Clive Bell or Virginia Woolf. Their lives are related in terms of their painting, avoiding both a too personal narrative and an entirely critical look.(Shone, 1976)

Bell probably wrote more from deep emotion and depth of feeling then he did from academic analysis. He was neither a professional critic like Fry nor an art historian like Berenson. In many way he was an outsider. A lover of good times, sport, food, he was highly social and a lover of many beautiful women. These were both weaknesses and his strengths. Maybe like Berenson, "he was only an eye, but what an eye."

An article by McLaughlin has explored this theme. Though often criticized for his circular reasoning and inconsistencies in thought, Clive Bell's sensibility has never been denied. The McLaughlin argues that Bell's definition of "significant form" has been criticized on the basis of his first attempt at definition rather than from his fully developed exposition of the problem. Bell's theories emphasized the

importance of art and the spiritual rewards to be gained from aesthetic experience, and in this endeavor the rigours of logic were unimportant to him as long as the central message was conveyed. The author concludes that Bell's arguments were often more vitriolic than rational because he aimed at revealing his opponents as 'philistine fools' rather than at developing a coherent argument for what seemed to him self-evident. (McLaughlin, 1977)

A recent article by Sparshott (1981) looks at Bell's theory from the point of view of aesthetic emotion; and is a defence of Clive Bell's theory of 'significant form' against criticisms by Ducasse and Steele. Bell argued that aesthetic emotion arises from certain combinations of color and line, not from the subject matter of works of art. Significant form is what differentiates art from non-art. The author's reformulation of Bell's account, which allows for the fact that no object will arouse the aesthetic emotion in all spectators; refutes objections that Bell believed that he had found an infallible method of distinguishing art and non-art.

It may not be "significant form" which separates art from non-art, but "symbolic form". At least that is where Herbert Read attempted to advance upon and improve on the earlier formulations of both Fry and Bell and by so doing he moved then aesthetic theory beyond the purely formal considerations.

What Sir Herbert Read did (Read, 1954) was to use Jungian Theory with its' emphasis upon symbolism to the formal consideration of the form that he had inherited from Bell and Fry. Read's subsequent influence as founder and editor of the British Journal of Aesthetics, and his role in the Societyfor Education in the Arts is one clear result of the inprint of the ideas of Bell for education in the arts.

In one sense a test of Bell's theories could be to look at the works produced by his immediate group recently their have been several major exhibitions of the works of both Bell and Grant which have been a consequence of this renaissance of interest in Bloomsbury.

An exhibition catalogue from a show held at Sheffield (1979) is an important document. Drawing on writings by the artist, by her sister, Virginia Woolf, and by her contemporaries, the author traces Vanessa Bell marriage to Clive Bell, her relationships with Roger Fry, Duncan Grant,and her sister Virginia, and her many foreign travels, as well as considering her development as an artist. This document examines the influence on Bell's work of the pre-Raphaelites, the French impressionists and the post-impressionists, and discusses her portraits, still lifes, landscapes and designs. In Vanessa Bell mature work is recognized the stark reduction of color, the radical simplicity of line and the sense of abstract design which together constitute Vanessa's unique post-impressionist style. Both Bell and Grant were separated from the mainstream of the modern movement after World War One. Their works while highly personal statements and reflections upon their life's experiences, they really didn't grow in their own work beyond the post-impressionist style.

An article by Gillespie (Gillespie, 1979) gives an important insight on some of the personal reflections of both Bell and Grant. In the interview, Angelica Garnett discusses her biography of Vanessa Bell, noting that, although Bell is generally rembered for her relationship with other people, including her father Sir Leslie Stephen, her sister Virginia Woolf, her husband Clive Bell, and her lover Roger Fry; she was a formidable painter and personality in her own right, and her life provides insight into the Bloomsbury Group.

Vital to both Bell and Grant as a place to show and sell their work, there were the several artists groups that at various times had been started by Roger Fry. Balfour (Balfour, 1978) has explored this highly important aspect of Bloomsbury. In writing about the Contemporary Art Society he observed that this society was founded by Ottoline Morrell, Roger Fry, Clive Bell and others of the Bloomsbury Group to 'encourage by purchase and exhibition painters who in any

other country would enjoy a certain official patronage'. The author gives details of the society's early purchases and donations to museums and galleries, and traces the continuing work of the society to the present, giving information on the methods by which works are acquired and distributed.

Recent critics are I think quite correct in their assumptions that at least Roger Fry, if not Bell himself, have been falsely accused as being too formalistic in orientation. (Taylor, 1977) This author believes that the received view of Roger Fry is based, to an excessive degree, on the period 1913-25 when he enunciated a severely formalistic theory very close to that of Clive Bell. Starting with a reply to I. A. Richard's attack on the notion of an 'aesthetic emotion', the author argues that a very different doctrine is implicit in Fry's later writings. Quite possible some of our dilemmas might be solved by consideration of the aesthetic experience itself as "significant form". It does seem that Bell himself may have conceptualized his idea of significant form as projections of the aestheic object itself.

What all these recent writers about the work of Clive Bell seem to be saying is that the general very restrictive interpretation of the doctorine of Art as Significant form seems to be misplaced. This brings by account to an interesting relationship to American art education, the ideas of Albert Barnes and John Dewey.

The Barnes Foundation

Albert C. Barnes of Merion Pennsylvania began to assemble his remarkable collection of early 20th century works at about the same time as Bell & Fry were having their greatest influences on 20th century art criticism. Barnes (1926) in his first book, "The Art in Painting" two great pains to try to refute both Bell and Fry whom he considered to be in serious error. Barnes attempted to remove Significant Form from a property of the art object though his insistence on the significance of

form as the basis for education in art. What Barnes and Dewey did in the early years at Merion (1926-1930) was to evolve a method of art education which have a formal basis. The need for Barnes to try to refute and discredit Bell and Fry (as well as almost anyone else) is somewhat beyond the scope of this paper.)

Of all the members of the Bloomsbury Group, Roger Fry remains the most engimatic, the more important, and in many ways the most tragic both professionally and personally. Roger Fry's analysis of form in Cezanne's paintings were in terms of "plastic construction," "intellect," and "sensibility" which combined to convey the painter's "classic spirit" and transcendentalism. Fifty years later, Greenberg at al. viewed the meritorious new art autonomously and deterministically, calling it "flat," "self-referential" and sought to understand expression in art, the painter's "vision" as carried by "design." But Fry's inheritors confused one portion of his means with ends. No later formlist would have written, as did Fry to conclude his 1927 Cezanne monograph, "such analysis halts before the ultimate concrete reality of the work it must leave untouched a greater part of its objective."

Leonard's study examines the origins of formalism in the evolution of modernist art in Britain and on the Continent. Fry's modernism, based in science, led him to develop a formalist aesthetic which aspired to an objective criticism. The assertiveness of Cezanne's compositions combined with his unobtrusive subject matter to make his works not only Fry's ideal, but the model for his theories. From Fry these ideas were translated into Clive Bell's vague but infectious notion "significant form," and passed into the post-impressionism of Bloomsbury painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, as even into the writing of Virginia Woolf. (Leonard, 1972) For Albert Barnes it was also the work of Cezanne which provided the basis for Barnes's ideas of an objective method of criticism and of art education. The book "Art of Cezanne" (Barnes and De Mazier, 1937) is not only one

of the very best early studies of that artist and his work, but formed the cornerstone of the Barnes-Dewey approach to education in art. Barnes like Fry had a scientific education and like Fry he wished to apply the methods of science to a consideration of art. The objective description of the formal properties of the work became for both the basis for art criticism as well as for art education.

A study of Twitchell shows the strengths and weaknesses of formalism in art and criticism with the external forces which contributed to the rise and decline of formalism. Formalism thrived apparently intact over six decades of enormous change in all other aspects of life; but Fry's broad, humanistic approach had evolved as it was adopted by Herbert Read and Kenneth Clark, and, in America, by Albert Barnes, Fritz Novotny, Erle Loran and Meyer Schapiro, then by Greenberg and followers. By 1960 formalism, now deterministic and narrow, was actually guilty of the elitism and irresponsibility with which Bloomsbury has been consistently, if usually unjustly, charged. (Twitchell, 1983)

Roger Fry was one of the first art historians and critics of his day to recognize the significance post-impressionism for the future of painting in our century. He was one of the top critics of his day. He was offered the directorship of two major museums, the Metropolitan and the National Gallery in London. Yet after a tragic love affair with Vanessa Bell 1912-1915, the permanent illness of his wife; Roger Fry proceeded to "spend" his energies upon may schemes. He started a workshop, the Omega (Collins, 1983) and even ends up in 1919 painting used furniture. He paints, writes books, lectures at Cambridge, makes pottery and was at least a follower of Bloomsbury. Recongition as a painter, that he so despartly desired, was always to elude him and his energies became spent. Above all was he responsible for Clive Bell's famous and equally egnomitric doctrine of "significant forms."

A study by Bywater (Bywater, 1975) has focused upon Bell and his aesthetic doctrines. Part I of his book consists of an argument claiming that Bell's formalism is a humanistic one involving the interaction of an artist and an audience that is evoked by a painting. Part II, a collection of eleven articles, indicate a shift in the ideas Bell expressed in "art", his major work. This shift is marked by Bell's admission of biographical and historical facts into the aesthetic evaluation of a painting, factors not permitted in a similar situation in "Art".

Clive Bell's definition of art as significant form, as it was expressed in his early work, "Art" (1913), has often been criticized for its cirular reasoning and its careless logic. But a study of his later works, "Since Cezanne" (1922) and "Landmarks in French Painting" (1927), shows that he frequently, if implicitly, returned to the question and in fact clarified the process by which significant form is produced. Bell developed a theory of tradition which explains how experience of the vision of other painters provides the artist with perceptual frames which can discover significant form only in works of art.

Bell's theory has of course been subjected to close criticism ever since he first published his 1913 essay. He and Roger Fry do deserve great credit for trying to connect those qualities which may be called significant form with the question of aesthetic emotion. By so doing, they of course, bring the question of the spectator family into the aesthetic dialogue.

Meager defends Bell in regard to some of the principal challenges which have been raised against his theory of art. She argues that his view is not fundamentally circular if one can identify the qualities of a form which make it significant and that his denial of aesthetic merit to representational content is not as unintuitive as it seems.

Since both Bell and Fry were what we might wish to call "working critics" it seems only fair to look at their aesthetics in terms of their own critical practices. Elliott (1965) has attempted to do that.

It has seemed to some writers on aesthetics that there was an inconsistency between the aesthetic theory of Clive Bell and his critical practice. In particular, he appears to make many judgments regarding the non-plastic qualities of artworks, judgments indicating that he looked upon such qualities with favor. Elliott argues that there is no inconsistency and that Bell justifies in his writings any references made to non-aesthetic material.

When considering the position of British aesthetics and art criticism it is no wonder that questions of values and ethics might arise. Certainly Ruskin and Morris interpretated social questions into the delate which have persisted in one form or another to this day. Dickie (1965) looks at this aspect of Bell's theories.

Dickie discusses the question of whether Bell conceived the notion of significant form as functioning to pick out a non-natural property of artworks, since it is evident from his writing that the moral philosophy of G. E. Moore had some influence upon his thinking in the matter.

There is probably no better person to sum up and comment on both Bell and Fry then Sir Herbert Read. Read reflects on Bell's position in the art world of early twentieth century Europe. He suggests that Bell may have been the one to make Roger Fry aware of the significance of post-impressionism and that Bell's theory of significant form may be traced to the work of Vernon Lee.

Influences of Bloombury Aesthetics (Work of G. L. K Morris)

Lorenz (1981) has studied the influence of Bell and Fry upon aesthetic thinking in this country. This study integrates Morris' art and writing, identifying their sources, interrelationships and contributions. Although not an innovator, Morris made a significant, and heretofore overlooked, contribution to the

development of American formalist criticism by serving as the conveyor of ideas formulated earlier by the English critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell and developed later by Clement Greenberg.

The existing literature on Morris contains information on his life and stylistic development as well as his role in the American Abstract Artists group, but nothing fully examines the sources or context of his critical ideas. Lorenzs' study is based upon previous literature on Morris, recorded interviews with him and people who knew him, an examination of all known writings and many known works, as well as an analysis of relevant critical source material of the period. Through this method, Morris' work and writing can be studied independently and in their contemporary context.

Morris' painting and writing were closely interrelated, revealing not only his artistic experience and development, but many general characteristics of European and American abstraction of the 1930s through the 1950s. His painting and writing from the thirties indicate intense assimilation and adaption of European modernism into personal and distinctly American themes. During the late 1930s, Morris' writings earned him recognition at the time as a major spokesman for American abstract art.

With the advent of Abstract Expressionism and its' critical support during the 1940s, Morris strengthened his position on the pre-eminence of structural abstraction, leading him to champion an established approach. By the early 1950s, Morris was a representative of the old guard which was still viable, but not innovative. The synthetic eclecticism of Morris' art and writing indicates a transitional figure providing historical continuity within American art between the assimilation of the 1930s and the innovation of the 1940s and 1950s. Rather than new insights of long-lasting influence, Morris contributed a crucial continuity of ideas and information necessary for the later acceptance of formalist criticism as

applied to Abstract Expressionism and subsequent American abstract art.

Anyone looking at the influence of Bloomsbury aesthetics needs to consider Susanne Langer. The philosophy of art concerns the analysis of issues, problems,and concepts related to art objects and to our experience of them. In the twentieth century, a great deal of this analysis centers around a specially formulated notion--"the aesthetic." Because this notion denotes a situation relating artists, works of art, and spectators, contemporary aestheticians typically examine three basic issues: the nature of creative activity, the nature of art objects, and the nature of aesthetic response.

Twentieth century philosophers of art are sharply divided in their analyses of the aesthetic, and until recently their disagreements have polarized into two quarters: the formalism of Clive Bell and Roger Fry and the expression theory of numerous contemporary aestheticians (including Tolstoy, Veron, Lee, Croce, Collingwood, Dewey, and Louis Arnaud Reid). These works take distinctive, frequently opposing approaches to the study of aesthetic problems. Formalists, for example, define the aesthetic soley in terms of its' formal aspects: aesthetic objects, claim Bell and Fry, possess the unique quality "significant form," and aesthetic experience involves the apprehension of this formal quality. Expression theoriests, by contrast, define the aesthetic exclusively through its expressive aspects: aesthetic objects, they say, are defined through feeling-qualities, and aesthetic experience involves the recognition of aesthetic affect. Formalism and expression theory, then, present incompatible accounts of the aesthetic, for formalism identifies art with form and refuses to acknowledge the aesthetic relevance of "life-feeling," while expression theory identifies art with feeling and refuses to define aesthetic properties in terms of formal properties.

Susanne Langer presents an aesthetic theory which, I believe, effectively reconciles the opposing assertions of formalism and expression theory. Starting

from an expressionist basis, Langer incorporates into her theory several key formalist assumptions. From expression theory, Langer borrows the basic insight that art expresses human feeling. From formalism, she borrows the notions that art is formal and "significant." The result of her synthesis is an aesthetics formalistic, expressionistic, and "semiotic" at once: "Art," says Langer in Feeling and Form, "is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling."

In the course of reinterpreting Langer's expression theory through formalism, I make several discoveries concerning each of these contemporary theories. First, I discover that expression theory presents no consistent view concering the implications of its thesis "art expresses feeling." Next, I discover that critics have almost universally overlooked some of formalism's theoretical elements, and these are elements which Langer elaborates in the formulation of her aesthetics. Formalism, I find, presents something much different from the purist thesis "art is form" (the thesis almost uniformly ascribed to formalists by commentators). Instead, it actually articulates a theory of aesthetic symbolism; under my interpretation of formalism (an interpretation supported by Langer's analysis of significant form), aesthetic objects should be viewed as iconic symbols of their designate--Ideas or forms.

This interpretation of formalism as a semiotic theory led me to another unexpected conclusion--kinship between it and imitation theory, its alleged antithesis. Formalism, I show, may actually be viewed as a kind of imitation theory; as such, it becomes subject to some of the same criticisms to which mimesis theory is vulnerable.

My reinterpretation of formalism theory has important bearings on my analysis of Langer's aesthetics, for I show that her assimilation of the formalist notion that "art reflects reality" to the expressionist notion that "art has feeling import" leads to an entirely original notion of art. This is the identification of

mind and art; Langer, I believe, is committed to a special variety of idealism, to which I give the name "artistic panpsychism." Under this view, art is a kind of mind, consciousness, or feeling-state; more precisely, art is a mode of "reflective awareness" or "second-order consciousness." Like reflective mind, art "symbolizes feeling," has both passive and constructive aspects, can actively formulate experience, and is "self-reflective". Many of these above observations have been based on work of Lorenz.

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